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## John Dingell: America's Longest-Serving Representative

By Randy James

In 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat, *Rock Around the Clock* hit the top of the music charts, and [John Dingell](#) was elected to Congress. The 29-year-old lawyer won a special election to replace his father, who died in office, and won a full term of his own the following year. On Feb. 11— after 26 more elections— the Michigan Democrat became the longest-serving House member in U.S. history. Dingell, now 82, spoke with TIME about his early days in Washington, the [crisis in the American automobile industry](#) and how he does *not* want to be remembered.

### **Your father was a U.S. Representative before you, so in a way you grew up around Congress. What was your first memory of the Capitol?**

It's one that sticks with me. The first memory I have was entering the House chamber through the East door. It was the biggest door I had ever gone through. It also was the biggest chamber I had ever seen. Remember, I was six years of age. I had never been in a place like this. I was a working-class kid from a Polish neighborhood in Detroit, and this was quite an event for me. I've only begun in later years to appreciate what it all meant.

### **How has Congress changed since you arrived?**

When I started I had four staff members and I had four typewriters. If I wanted more, I had to buy them myself. I had one paid trip per year, round-trip. So I brought the family down here about the first of January, and I brought them home when the Congress adjourned, usually about the first of August.

Today, we're Tuesday through Thursday; we can fly home any time. As a result the Congress doesn't get to know each other the way they used to.

### **What do you make of all this attention you're getting? You've said it's a "curse" that people often**

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**remember lawmakers for how long they've spent in office.**

If I had just stayed here for the number of years I've stayed here and hadn't done anything, there wouldn't be much to celebrate. But I've been a pretty good member and I've worked hard and I've gotten a lot of legislation through. I've done a lot of things for the people I serve and for the country. I'd rather be remembered for that than for the length of time I've served.

**You've worked with 11 Presidents on the job so far. How is President Obama stacking up?**

I think very well. There hasn't been any time wasted while he was getting down to being President. He's done a good job in selecting his cabinet. He's doing a very good job in presenting his case. And the people like him. ([See Obama's White House.](#))

**You've been a champion of the auto industry your entire career. How did it fall into such bad shape?**

There are a lot of reasons. Currency manipulations by the Chinese, Japanese and Koreans. They've not enforced [NAFTA](#) or the trade laws. And the fact we don't have national health insurance.

American cars have \$750 worth of steel in them, and they have \$1,600 worth of health care. And if you look, all of our competitors have national health insurance. If we had that \$1,600 go to the American manufacturers, you'd see us having the flushest automobile manufacturers in the world.

**You've had other jobs besides lawmaker. You were also a park ranger during college and law school.**

I spent four years at Rocky Mountain National Park and one year at Mount Rainier. I did all kinds of things, I was what they called a utility ranger. I did trail patrol work, I trapped bears, I blew beaver dams, I was a speed cop, I was a garbage man. It was a wonderful job— hell, I would have paid to have done what I did there. But I didn't have any money, so I was glad when they paid me instead.

**You've seen a lot of history since arriving in Washington. Are you more or less hopeful about the country's future now than you've been in the past?**

Well, I'm always hopeful. I think this is a great country, and we have a great Constitution. We have, as you know, severe challenges. [The recession](#) we're in is the worst I've seen since the Great Depression. I was a kid during the Great Depression, it was a terrible time. Now, is it the same? No. Are there parallels? Yes. Are the parallels scary? You darn bet.

But I have great faith in the country. We've survived some terrible, terrible challenges. And I think we can do it again.

### **Can the people of Michigan's 15th District expect to see you on the ballot again in 2010?**

I don't have any idea. When that time comes, Deborah and I sit down and we decide what the people of the 15th want, we decide what the good Lord wants, and then we decide what we want. That's a decision I make every two years, and I don't make it before the right time.

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